

NEWS AND NOTES FOR FLORIDA VETERANS

Veterans Service Center, VA Regional Office
St. Petersburg, FL

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The "News and Notes for Florida Veterans" is published monthly by the Veterans Service Center, VA Regional Office, St. Petersburg, Florida, to provide information on VA benefit programs to veterans and dependents in Florida. The material presented does not have the effect of laws or regulations. Please send questions or comments on this newsletter to Veterans Service Center, ATTN: "News and Notes," PO Box 1437, St. Petersburg, FL 33731. We do not have the resources to maintain a mailing list for distribution to individuals; however this newsletter is available on the St. Petersburg VA Regional Office web site at www.vba.va.gov/ro/south/spete.

NATIONAL SALUTE TO HOSPITALIZED VETERANS The week of February 14 each year is your opportunity to say thank you to a special group of men and women, more than 98,000 veterans of the U.S. armed services who are cared for every day in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical centers, outpatient clinics, domiciliaries, and nursing homes.

The purpose of the National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans Program is to pay tribute and express appreciation to hospitalized veterans; increase community awareness of the role of the VA medical center; and encourage citizens to visit hospitalized veterans and to become involved as volunteers

During the National Salute, VA invites individuals, veterans groups, military personnel, civic organizations, businesses, schools, local media, celebrities and sports stars to participate in a variety of activities at the VA medical centers. The activities and events include special ward visits and valentine distributions; photo opportunities; school essay contests; special recreation activities and veteran recognition programs.

The week also provides an opportunity for the community to become acquainted with the volunteer opportunities within the medical center. Contact your nearest VA Medical Center and ask for Voluntary Service to discover the wonderful things you, your group or organization can do to salute America's Heroes.

IT'S TAX TIME AGAIN! All VA benefits are exempt from taxation. VA does not issue W-2 or 1099 forms. VA benefits are subject to collection for tax liens, i.e. in cases where the beneficiary owes the IRS. Secondary interest on VA benefits may be taxable. For example, if a veteran deposits his or her compensation check in an interest-bearing account, the interest is not tax exempt.

Veterans in receipt of military retired pay who are awarded VA compensation benefits retroactively may claim an exclusion on their income in the amount of VA compensation they would have received had they not been

in receipt of military retired pay. Affected veterans should claim the exclusion by submitting the VA award letter showing the amount and effective date of compensation they would have received but for the receipt of military retired pay. IRS instructions tell affected veterans to submit a "VA Form 20-8993." VA Form 20-8993 is the award letter.

Claimants of the IRS Disability Income Exclusion are required to submit a certificate attesting to permanent and total disability. Under an agreement with the IRS, IRS will accept a VA certification on VA Form 21-0172, Certification of Permanent and Total Disability, based solely on an *existing* rating of permanent and total disability in place of the required private physician's statement. The VA Form 21-0172 form may be obtained by contacting the VA Regional Office.

NATIONAL CEMETERY - PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLORIDA The new 313-acre national cemetery in south Florida will serve veterans' needs for the next 50 years. The new cemetery is located in Palm Beach County, 19 miles northwest of Boca Raton.

Burials are expected to begin in mid-2006 in the initial "fast track" development area of about three to five acres. This small-scale development is separate from the major phase one construction project and allows for burials to begin during construction of the cemetery. Initial operations will be conducted from an office trailer, a temporary committal service shelter, and equipment shed.

VA expects to award a construction contract and begin phase one construction in early 2006. The initial phase one construction will include: the "fast track" burial area, an entrance area, administration and maintenance complex, public information center, committal service shelters, full-casket gravesites, in-ground sites for cremation remains, and columbaria niches for cremation remains.

This new cemetery to serve veterans in the south Florida area is the fifth national cemetery in Florida. Florida's other four national cemeteries are: Barrancas, near Pensacola;

St. Augustine; Florida National Cemetery, Bushnell; and Bay Pines, in St. Petersburg. More information on VA's National Cemetery Administration is available on its website, www.cem.va.gov.

VETERANS' HEALTH CARE OUTSCORES PRIVATE

SECTOR - AGAIN (VA News Release January 18, 2006)
WASHINGTON – Veterans continue to be more satisfied with their health care than the average American, according to an annual report on customer satisfaction that compares the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) health care system with private-sector health care. The ratings came in the annual American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), which ranks "customer satisfaction" with various federal programs and private-sector industries.

The ACSI, an independent survey of customer satisfaction within both the federal and private sectors, gave VA's inpatient care a rating of 83 on a 100-point scale. That's 10 percentage points higher than the 73 rating achieved for inpatient care by the private-sector health care industry.

VA's rating of 80 for outpatient care was five percentage points higher than the 75 rating for private-sector outpatient care and nine percentage points higher than the average satisfaction rating for all federal services. The latest findings mark the sixth consecutive year VA's health care system has outranked the private sector for customer satisfaction.

Since 1994, the ACSI survey has been a national measurement of customer satisfaction with the quality of goods and services in the United States. ACSI produces indices of satisfaction for seven economic sectors, 41 industries, 200 private-sector companies and two types of local government services.

VA's strong showing came after interviews with veterans who have recently used the Department's services. The report is the product of the National Quality Research Center at the University of Michigan Business School, the CFI group, and the Federal Consulting Group.

REMINDER - ELIGIBILITY VERIFICATION REPORTS

(EVR) Beneficiaries who are receiving income-based VA benefits (Pension and Parent's Dependency and Indemnity Compensation) and who received an Eligibility Verification Report (EVR) form must return those forms by March 1, 2006 or their benefits will be suspended. For information, call 1-877-294-6380.

IMPORTANT DATES IN FEBRUARY

February 1 payments for January due

February 6 last day to input change of address or establish direct deposit on compensation and pension awards in time for the 03-01-2006 payments

February 17 last day to change or cancel direct deposit on compensation or pension awards in time for the 03-01-2006 payments

February 20 Federal holiday - George Washington's Birthday

VA FACILITIES ADDRESSES AND TELEPHONE NUMBERS:

VA Regional Office, St. Petersburg - PO Box 1437, St. Petersburg, FL 33731 **1-800-827-1000**

Regional Processing Office, Atlanta, GA (education claims) - PO Box 100022, Decatur, GA 30031-7022 **1-888-GIBILL1 (442-4551)**

Telephone number for Chapter 30 self-verifications **1-877-823-2378**

Veterans Health Administration Toll-Free Hotline (medical care) - **1-877-222-8387**

VA EFT Information Hotline (electronic funds transfer - direct deposit) **1-877-838-2778**

VA Insurance Center, Philadelphia (VA Insurance) - PO Box 42954, Philadelphia, PA 19101 **1-800-669-8477**

VA Health Administration Center (CHAMPVA and Spina Bifida health care) -

CHAMPVA inquiries: PO Box 65023, Denver, CO 80206-5023

CHAMPVA claims: PO Box 65024, Denver, CO 80206-5024
Spina Bifida inquiries and claims: PO Box 65025, Denver, CO 80206-5025 **1-800-733-8387**

Foreign Medical Program Office (medical treatment abroad) -
PO Box 65021, Denver, CO 80206-5021 **303-331-7590**

National Cemeteries

10,000 Bay Pines Blvd N, Bay Pines FL **727-398-9426**
6502 SW 102nd Ave, Bushnell FL 33513 **352-793-7740**
Naval Air Station, Pensacola FL **850-453-4108/4846**

National Cemetery Administration Office of Memorial Programs (headstones and markers) - 810 Vermont Ave NW, Washington, DC 20420 **1-800-697-6947**

Loan Guaranty Eligibility Center (certificates of eligibility)
PO Box 20729, Winston-Salem, NC 27120
1-888-244-6711

Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) Unit - Chicago VA Regional Office **1-800-829-4833**

INTERNET SITES OF INTEREST:

VA Web Site: www.va.gov

VA Forms: www.va.gov/vaforms

VA Web Automated Reference Materials System (WARMS) www.warms.vba.va.gov

Property Management (sale of VA-reposessed homes): www.ocwen.com

Florida Dept of Veterans Affairs: www.floridavets.org

St. Pete Regional Office: www.vba.va.gov/ro/south/spete